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ABSTRACT

Studies suggest that the challenge of violence in public schools can be met through character education, whether by providing a school culture in which core values are practiced or some form of moral training (indoctrination). To assess the need for character education in rural schools, small-school superintendents and board members in central Missouri were surveyed; 106 responded. Results show that 50 percent thought the nation's schools were not doing a good job of teaching core values, and 92 percent believed a need exists for character education in the curriculum. Ninety-four percent believed some type of character education should be offered in their own districts, and 75 percent responded that school culture and modeling were not sufficient by themselves. Many thought character education should be offered through the counseling and guidance curriculum at both the elementary and high school levels. (SAS)

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Do Rural Schools Need Character Education?

Introduction:

Delattre (1994) forewarns of the widespread rise of barbarism in America and implores schools and school boards to sustain hope by finding the courage to oppose youth violence, gang terrorism, and drug trafficking and consumption. Noguera (1996) suggests that the problem of violence in schools, just as the related problem of violence in society, is one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary education. Bachus (1994) further contends that while most of the violent behavior occurs in urban and suburban school districts, school administrators and school board members of small school districts must be prepared for the potential for violence as well. It seems apparent that societal problems are extending their tentacles into all the nation's classrooms. Character education, however it is defined and delivered, is indeed, as vital in small rural schools as in suburban and urban ones.

Teachers of the 90's appear to be as concerned about serious behavior management problems as they are the curriculum they teach. Increasingly more children are qualifying for "Behavioral Disorder" classrooms in which their social and emotional behavioral problems can be addressed. Simultaneously, alternative schools are being created for those individuals who find a normal classroom environment too constraining for their critical disparate needs.

As a means of meeting this challenge, President Clinton, in his 1996 State of the Union address, stressed the importance of teaching character education in the public schools in order to impart good values and good citizenship. Stephen Covey endorsed this idea while speaking at the National Association of Elementary School Principals Conference in March, 1997. He beseeched the principals that their highest leadership role is to create a culture in which moral authority pervades the school culture (1997).

Some confusion and dissension exists regarding the meaning and manner of

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delivery of character education. Kohn (1997) suggests there are two very dissimilar approaches to character education. He explains that the first is basically a way of helping individual students become good citizens by providing a school culture in which core values are practiced. The second involves a style of moral training with extrinsic motivators and other means of behavioral modification techniques which may be compared to indoctrination rather than character improvement (Kohn, 1997).

There is little, if any, research focusing specifically on rural school districts and the manner in which they are addressing the character education issue. Do rural schools have the same need for character education as those located in larger and urban areas? A review of the literature failed to find any specific reference to the adoption of character education in rural schools. Since rural schools appear to have the advantages of a more personalized environment with less anonymity than one might expect to find in larger urban areas, however, it might be assumed that the social environment would be more hospitable for delivery of the core values. It is apparent that crime and violence are significantly less prevalent in rural areas, thus one might conclude that many of the social ills for which character education is to cure do not exist at the rural school level.

A 1994 release from the U. S. Government Printing Office concludes that what rural schools lack in resources, they often compensate with a supportive atmosphere that encourages participation in extracurricular activities, higher attendance, and a sense of belonging. If the prevailing culture is as strong in most rural schools, then it is a possibility that they are already serving the character developmental needs of the students. School culture is considered by most advocates as being the foundation for a healthy character education program. The problem which many schools face today, however, is the *kind* of culture which the school provides. Is it a positive one which nurtures and models healthy character development or is it a more sterile culture

devoid of positive messages related to character building and doing the "right" thing. Lickona (1992) says that students need to see good examples in all aspects of the school life, therefore, schools should become exemplary models of virtue and character. Board members and school administrators should insist that teachers model high moral standards and practice sensitivity and caring to students while teaching them to develop self-discipline (1992). Teaching character education by providing a positive school culture has been practiced since the inception of schools. The concept of cooperative learning is a contemporary extension of this philosophy which focuses on promoting a collaborative classroom culture within the school. This format appears a natural vehicle for extending and expanding a character education curriculum.

Kevin Ryan, Director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University, explains that the curriculum is the primary source of character education since it contains the stories, biographies, and events which allow for human reflection that in turn carry our moral wisdom and serve as the guide to good character (1995). An example of the curriculum of bygone days is the McGuffey's Reader which was the primer to which children were introduced. Practically every lesson involved the teaching of respect for oneself and others, and a myriad of other moral lessons. Aesop's Fables, another icon of bygone days, taught us and our grandparents before us lessons in morality regarding the avoidance of greed and jealousy and the adherence to honesty and responsibility.

Herzog and Pittman (1995) designed a study entitled *The Rural Attitude* and surveyed 108 college students regarding rural life and rural education. They found that students from rural areas were very optimistic about their schools. The respondents reported that their rural communities were environments of peace and safety which valued home, family, community and caring. They likewise reported their

schools had strength in this area. It was deemed important, therefore, to determine the perception of rural school administrators and board members regarding the need for character education in their schools.

Although character education is being implemented in a number of school districts across the country in a wide variety of teaching models, it might be questioned whether rural schools, with an already packed curriculum, extended school days, and minimal budgets should add yet another course to their loads. Additionally, the crime rates of the rural areas do not match those of highly populated areas and although not totally insulated from the ills of society, the smaller rural school districts are not experiencing the violence and assault that larger districts experience.

If small rural schools are maintaining students' character development by preserving a rural culture of traditional values and morals, then the proponents of the social environment of school culture would declare extra courses as being unnecessary because of their contention that the social environment makes the child. In short, put a child in a kind and respectful environment and he or she will be kind and respectful. Likewise, put a child in a violent environment and he will act accordingly. Others, believing that the tenets of character education can be embedded in the existing curriculum, have worked to do so.

Methods

One hundred and six small school superintendents and board members in central Missouri recently responded to a survey relative to their perception of a need for character education in their curriculum. No attempt was made to distinguish between the responses of superintendents and board members. Data was analyzed in the aggregate. They were surveyed to determine their perception of the need for character education at the national level and whether they believed the nation's schools are doing a good job of developing character in American school children by

teaching the core values. Character Education was defined as the education of the core values shared by the citizens of the school district which include honesty, respect for oneself and others, responsibility, and trustworthiness.

The superintendents and board members were then asked:

1) Do you believe the nation's schools are doing a good job of teaching the core values to American school children?
2) Do you believe a need exists for character education in the public school curriculum?
3) Do you believe the children in your district should be offered some type of character education?
4) If you believe character education should be taught in your district's schools, could it be achieved by providing an appropriate school climate and teacher/administrator modeling alone? and
5) If you believe additional teaching is needed, indicate whether character education should be taught as a curriculum subject, through the guidance/counseling program, home room period, or other.

Results and Conclusions

When asked if they believed the nation's schools are doing a good job of teaching the core values to American school children, 50% of the rural superintendents and school board members responded negatively. Ninety-two percent said they believe a need exists for character education in the public school curriculum. The first two questions were designed to assess their beliefs regarding national public education in general. Questions three and four were directed to the educators' own school districts and their needs. For example, question three asked: "Do you believe the children in *your* district should be offered some type of character education" to which 94% responded in the affirmative. Question four stated: "If you

believe character education should be taught in your district's schools, could it be achieved by providing an appropriate school climate and teacher/administrator modeling alone?" Seventy-five percent of those surveyed believed that school culture and modeling were not sufficient by themselves in serving as character education. The final question was: "If you believe additional teaching is needed, indicate whether character education should be taught as a curriculum subject, through the guidance/counseling program, home room period, or other. The board members and superintendents believed that character education should be offered at the elementary level as well as at the high school level and 64% said it should be offered through the counseling and guidance department at the high school while 59% said it should be offered by the counseling and guidance department at the elementary school.

Importance of the Study:

Herzog and Pittman (1995) suggest that rural schools and communities have strengths that should be part of the prescription for remedying problems and directing changes in rural education. They contend that prior to reform, it is first necessary to understand the problems as well as the strengths of rural social and educational communities. Based on the data collected from the aforementioned survey, rural schools board members and superintendents are very much in favor of incorporating character education in their own rural schools as well as the nation at large. They further believe that while providing the proper school culture is important, it is not enough. The majority recommended adding a character education focus within the guidance and counseling areas of the curriculum.

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